

A GOOD ACTION

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IT is undoubtedly true that the majority of us perform the majority of our actions through what are commonly known as mixed motives.

It would certainly have been quite impossible for Mr. Edwin Pothecary to analyze the concrete impulse which eventually prompted him to perform his good action. It may have been a natural revolt from the somewhat petty and cramped punctilio of his daily life; his drab home life, the bickering, wearing, grasping routine of the existence of fish-and-chips dispenser. A man who earns his livelihood by buying fish and potatoes in the cheapest market, and selling them in the Waterloo Road cannot afford to indulge his altruistic fancies to any lavish extent. It is true that the business of Mr. Edwin Pothecary was a tolerably successful one—he employed three assistants and a boy named Scales who was not so much an assistant as an encumbrance and wholesale plate-smasher. Mr. Pothecary engaged him because he thought his name seemed appropriate to the fish-trade. In a weak moment he pandered to this sentimental whim, another ingredient in the strange composition which influences us to do this, that, and the other. But it was not by pandering to whims of this nature that Mr. Pothecary had built up this progressive and odoriferous business with its gay shop

front of blue and brown tiles. It was merely a minor lapse. In the fish-and-chip trade one has to be keen, pushful, self-reliant, ambidexterous, a student of human nature, forbearing, far-seeing, imaginative, courageous, something of a controversialist with a streak of fatalism as pronounced as that of a high-priest in a Brahmin temple. It is better, moreover, to have an imperfect nasal organism, and to be religious.

Edwin had all these qualities. Every day he went from Quince Villa at Buffington to London — forty minutes in the train — and back at night. On Sunday he took the wife and three children to the Methodist Chapel at the corner of the street to both morning and evening services. But even this religious observance does not give us a complete solution for the sudden prompting of an idea to do a good action. Edwin had attended chapel for fifty-two years and such an impulse had never occurred to him before. He may possibly have been influenced by some remark of the preacher, or was it that twinge of gout which set him thinking of the unwritten future? Had it anything to do with the Boy-Scout movement? Some one at some time had told him of an underlying idea — that every day in one's life one should do one pure, good and unselfish action.

Perhaps after all it was all due to the gayety of a spring morning. Certain it is that as he swung out of the garden gate on that morning in April something stirred in him. His round puffy face blinked heavenwards. Almond blossoms fluttered in the breeze above

the hedgerows. Larks were singing. . . . Suddenly his eye alighted upon the roof of the Peels' hen-house opposite and Mr. Edwin Pothecary scowled. Lord! How he hated those people! The Peels were Pothecary's *bêtes-noires*. Snobs! Pirates! Rotters!

The Peels' villa was at least three times as big as the Pothecarys'. It was, in fact, not a villa at all. It was a "Court"—whatever that was. It was quite detached, with about fourteen rooms in all, a coach-house, a large garden, and two black sheds containing forty-five fowls, leading an intensive existence. The Pothecarys had five fowls which sometimes did and sometimes didn't supply them with two or three eggs a day, but it was known that the Peels sent at least two hundred and fifty eggs to market every week, besides supplying their own table. Mr. Peel was a successful dealer in quills and bristles. His wife was the daughter of a post office official and they had three stuck up daughters who would have no truck at all with the Pothecarys. You may appreciate then the twinge of venom which marked the face of Edwin as he passed through his front gate and observed the distant roof of the Peels' fowl-house. And still the almond blossoms nodded at him above the hedge. The larks sang. . . . After all, was it fair to hate any one because they were better off than oneself? Strange how these moods obsess one. The soft air caressed Edwin's cheek. Little flecks of cloud scudded gayly into the suburban panorama. Small green shoots were appearing everywhere. One ought not to hate any one at all—of

course. It is absurd. So bad for oneself, apart from the others. One ought rather to be kind, forgiving, loving all mankind. Was that a lark or a thrush? He knew little about birds. Fish now! . . . A not entirely unsatisfactory business really the fried fish trade — when things went well. When customers were numerous and not too cantankerous. Quite easy to run, profitable. A boy came singing down the road. The villas clustered together more socially. There was a movement of spring life. . . .

As Edwin turned the corner of the Station Road, the impulse crystallized. One good action. To-day he would perform one good, kind, unselfish, unadvertised action. No one should ever know of it. Just one to-day. Then perhaps one to-morrow. And so on; in time it might become a habit. That is how one progressed. He took his seat in the crowded third-class smoker and pretended to read his newspaper, but his mind was too actively engaged with the problems of his new resolution. How? When? Where? How does one do a definitely good action? What is the best way to go to work? One could, of course, just quietly slip some money into a poor-box if one could be found. But would this be very good and self-sacrificing? Who gets money put in a poor-box? Surely his own family were poor enough, as far as that went. But he couldn't go back home and give his wife a sovereign. It would be advertising his charity, and he would look silly doing it. His business? He might turn up and say to his assistants: "Boys, you shall all have a day's holiday.

We'll shut up, and here's your pay for the day." Advertising again; besides, what about the hundreds of poor workers in the neighborhood who relied for their mid-day sustenance on "Pothecary's Pride-of-the-Ocean Popular Plaice to Eat?" It would be cruel, cruel and — bad for business in the future. The public would lose confidence in that splendid gold-lettered tablet in the window which said "Cod, brill, halibut, plaice, pilchards always on hand. Eat them or take them away."

The latter sentence did not imply that if you took them away you did *not* eat them; it simply meant that you could either stand at the counter and eat them from a plate with the aid of a fork and your fingers (or at one of the wooden benches if you could find room — an unlikely contingency, alternatively you could wrap them up in a piece of newspaper and devour them without a fork at the corner of the street.

No, it would not be a good action in any way to close the Popular Plaice to eat. Edwin came to the conclusion that to perform this act satisfactorily it were better to divorce the proceeding entirely from any connection with home or business. The two things didn't harmonize. A good action must be a special and separate effort in an entirely different setting. He would take the day off himself and do it thoroughly.

Mr. Pothecary was known in the neighborhood of the Waterloo Road as "The Stinker," a title easily earned by the peculiar qualities of his business and the obvious additional fact that a Pothecary was a chemist. He

was a very small man, bald-headed with yellowy-white side whiskers, a blue chin, a perambulating nostril with a large wart on the port side. He wore a square bowler hat which seemed to thrust out the protruding flaps of his large ears. His greeny-black clothes were always too large for him and ended in a kind of thick spiral above his square-toed boots. He always wore a flat white collar — more or less clean — and no tie. This minor defect was easily atoned for by a heavy silver chain on his waistcoat from which hung gold seals and ribbons connecting with watches, knives, and all kinds of ingenious appliances in his waistcoat pockets.

The noble intention of his day was a little chilled on his arrival at the shop. In the first place, although customers were then arriving for breakfast, the boy Scales was slopping water over the front step. Having severely castigated the miscreant youth and prophesied that his chances of happiness in the life to come were about as remote as those of a dead dog-fish in the upper reaches of the Thames, he made his way through the customers to the room at the back, and there he met Dolling.

Dolling was Edwin's manager, and he cannot be overlooked. In the first place, he was remarkably like a fish himself. He had the same dull expressionless eyes and the drooping mouth and drooping mustache. Everything about him drooped and dripped. He was always wet. He wore a gray flannel shirt and no collar or tie. His braces, trousers, and hair all seemed the same color. He hovered in the background with a knife, and did

the cutting up and dressing. He had, moreover, all the taciturnity of a fish, and its peculiar ability for getting out of a difficulty. He never spoke. He simply looked lugubrious, and pointed at things with his knife. And yet Edwin knew that he was an excellent manager. For it must be observed that in spite of the gold-lettered board outside with its fanfare of cod, brill, halibut, plaice and pilchards, whatever the customer asked for, by the time it had passed through Dolling's hand it was just *fish*. No nonsense about it at all. Just plain fish leveled with a uniform brown crust. If you asked for cod you got *fish*. If you asked for halibut you also got *fish*. Dolling was something of an artist.

On this particular morning, as Edward entered the back room, Dolling was scratching the side of his head with the knife he used to cut up the fish; a sure sign that he was perplexed about something. It was not customary to exchange greetings in this business, and when he observed "the guv'nor" enter he just withdrew the knife from his hair and pointed it at a packing case on the side table. Edwin knew what this meant. He went up and pressed his flat nose against the chest of what looked like an over-worked amphibian that had been turned down by its own Trades Union. Edwin sneezed before he had had time to withdraw his nose.

"Yes, that's a dud lot," he said. And then suddenly an inspirational moment nearly overwhelmed him. Here was a chance. He would turn to Dolling and say:

"Dolling, this fish is slightly tainted. We must

throw it away. We bought it at our risk. Yesterday morning when it arrived it was just all right, but keeping it in that hot room downstairs where you and your wife sleep has probably finished it. We mustn't give it to our customers. It might poison them — ptomaine poison, you know . . . eh, Dolling?" It would be a good action, a self-sacrificing action, eh? But when he glanced at the face of Dolling he knew that such an explosion would be unthinkable. It would be like telling a duck it mustn't swim, or an artist that he mustn't paint, or a boy on a beach that he mustn't throw stones in the sea. It was the kind of job that Dolling enjoyed. In the course of a few hours he knew quite well that whatever he said, the mysterious and evil-smelling monster would be served out in dainty parcels of halibut, cod, brill, plaice, etc.

Business was no place for a good action. Too many others depended on it, were involved in it. Edwin went up to Dolling and shouted in his ear — he was rather deaf:

"I'm going out. I may not be back to-day."

Dolling stared at the wall. He appeared about as interested in the statement as a cod might be that had just been informed that a Chinese coolie had won the Calcutta sweep-stake. Edwin crept out of the shop abashed. He felt horribly uncomfortable. He heard some one mutter: "Where's The Stinker off to?" and he realized how impossible it would be to explain to any one there present that he was off to do a good action.

"I will go to some outlying suburb," he thought.

Once outside in the sunshine he tried to get back into the benign mood. He traveled right across London and made for Golders Green and Hendon, a part of the world foreign to him. By the time he had boarded the Golders Green 'bus he had quite recovered himself. It was still a brilliant day. "The better the day the better the deed," he thought aptly. He hummed inaudibly; that is to say, he made curious crooning noises somewhere behind his silver chain and signets; the sound was happily suppressed by the noise of the 'bus.

It seemed a very long journey. It was just as they were going through a rather squalid district near Cricklewood that the golden chance occurred to him. The fares had somewhat thinned. There were scarcely a dozen people in the 'bus. Next to him barely a yard away he observed a poor woman with a baby in her arms. She had a thin, angular, wasted face, and her clothes were threadbare but neat. A poor, thoroughly honest and deserving creature, making a bitter fight of it against the buffets of a cruel world. Edwin's heart was touched. Here was his chance. He noticed that from her wrist was suspended a shabby black bag, and the bag was open. He would slip up near her and drop in a half-crown. What joy and rapture when she arrived home and found the unexpected treasure! An unknown benefactor! Edwin chuckled and wormed his way surreptitiously along the seat. Stealthily he fingered his half-crown and hugged it in the palm of his left hand. His heart beat with the excitement of his exploit. He looked out of the window opposite and

fumbled his hand towards the opening in the bag. He touched it. Suddenly a sharp voice rang out:

“That man’s picking your pocket!”

An excited individual opposite was pointing at him. The woman uttered an exclamation and snatched at her bag. The baby cried. The conductor rang the bell. Every one seemed to be closing in on Edwin. Instinctively he snatched his hand away and thrust it in his pocket (the most foolish thing he could have done). Every one was talking. A calm muscular-looking gentleman who had not spoken seized Edwin by the wrist and said calmly:

“Look in your bag, Madam, and see whether he has taken anything.”

The 'bus came to a halt. Edwin muttered:

“I assure you — nothing of the sort —”

How could he possibly explain that he was doing just the opposite? Would a single person believe a word of his yarn about the half-crown? The woman whimpered:

“No, 'e ain't taken nothin', bad luck to 'im. There was only four pennies and a 'alfpenny anyway. Dirty thief!”

“Are you goin' to give 'im in charge?” asked the conductor.

“Yer can't if 'e ain't actually taken nothin', can yer? The dirty thievin' swine tryin' to rob a 'ard workin' 'onest woman!”

“I wasn't! I wasn't!” feebly spluttered Edwin, blushing a ripe beetroot color.

"Shame! Shame! Chuck 'im off the 'bus! Dirty sneak! Call a copper!" were some of the remarks being hurled about.

The conductor was losing time and patience. He beckoned vigorously to Edwin and said:

"Come on, off you go!"

There was no appeal. He got up and slunk out. Popular opinion was too strong against him. As he stepped off the back board, the conductor gave him a parting kick which sent him flying on to the pavement. It was an operation received with shrieks of laughter and a round of applause from the occupants of the vehicle, taken up by a small band of other people who had been attracted by the disturbance. He darted down a back street to the accompaniment of boos and jeers.

It says something for Edwin Pothecary that this unfortunate rebuff to his first attempt to do a good action did not send him helter-skelter back to the fried fish shop in the Waterloo Road. He felt crumpled, bruised, mortified, disappointed, discouraged; but is not the path of all martyrs and reformers strewn with similar débris? Are not all really disinterested actions liable to misconstruction? He went into a dairy and partook of a glass of milk and a bun. Then he started out again. He would see more rural, less sophisticated people. In the country there must be simple, kindly people, needing his help. He walked for several hours with but a vague sense of direction. At last he came to a public park. A group of dirty boys were seated on the grass. They were apparently having a banquet.

They did not seem to require him. He passed on, and came to an enclosure. Suddenly between some rhododendron bushes he looked into a small dell. On a seat by himself was an elderly man in a shabby suit. He looked the picture of misery and distress. His hands were resting on his knees, and his eyes were fixed in a melancholy scrutiny on the ground. It was obvious that some great trouble obsessed him. He was as still as a shadow. It was the figure of a man lost in the past or — contemplating suicide? Edwin's breath came quickly. He made his way to him. In order to do this it was necessary to climb a railing. There was probably another way round, but was there time? At any minute there might be a sudden movement, the crack of a revolver. Edwin tore his trousers and scratched his forearm, but he managed to enter the dell unobserved. He approached the seat. The man never looked up. Then Edwin said with sympathetic tears in his voice:

“ My poor fellow, may I be of any assistance — ? ”

There was a disconcerting jar. The melancholy individual started and turned on him angrily:

“ Blast you! I'd nearly got it! What the devil are you doing here? ”

And without waiting for an answer he darted away among the trees. At the same time a voice called over the park railings:

“ Ho! you, there, what are you doing over there? You come back the way you came. I saw yer.”

The burly figure of a park-keeper with gaiters and

stout stick beckoned him. Edwin got up and clambered back again, scratching his arm.

"Now then," said the keeper. "Name, address, age, and occupation, if *you* please."

"I was only—" began Edwin. But what *was* he only doing? Could he explain to a park-keeper that he was only about to do a kind action to a poor man? He spluttered and gave his name, address, age, and occupation.

"Oh," exclaimed the keeper. "Fried fish, eh? And what were you trying to do? Get orders? Or were you begging from his lordship?"

"His lordship?"

"That man you was speaking to was Lord Budleigh-Salterton, the great scientist. He's thinkin' out 'is great invention, otherwise I'd go and ask 'im if 'e wanted to prosecute yer for being in 'is park on felonious intent or what."

"I assure you—" stammered Mr. Pothecary.

The park-keeper saw him well off the premises, and gave him much gratuitous advice about his future behavior, darkened with melancholy prophecies regarding the would-be felon's strength of character to live up to it.

Leaving the park he struck out towards the more rural neighborhood. He calculated that he must be somewhere in the neighborhood of Hendon. At the end of a lane he met a sallow-faced young man walking rapidly. His eyes were bloodshot and restless. He glanced at Edwin and stopped.

"Excuse me, sir," he said.

Edwin drew himself to attention. The young man looked up and down nervously. He was obviously in a great state of distress.

“What can I do for you?”

“I — I — h-hardly like to ask you, sir, I —”

He stammered shockingly. Edwin turned on his most sympathetic manner.

“You are suffering. What is it?”

“Sh-Sh-Shell-shock, shir.”

“Ah!”

At last! Some heroic reflex of the war darted through Edwin’s mind. Here was his real chance at last. A poor fellow broken by the war and in need, neglected by an ungrateful country. Almost hidden by his outer coat he observed one of those little strips of colored ribbon, which implied more than one campaign.

“Where did you meet your trouble?” he asked.

“P — P — P-Palestine, sir, capturing a T-T-Turkish redoubt. I was through Gallipoli, too, sir, but I won’t d-d-distress you. I am in a — in a — hospital at St. Albans, came to see my g-g-g-girl, but she’s g-g-g-gone — v-v-vanished. . . .”

“You don’t say so!”

“T-t-trouble is I l-l-l-lost my p-pass back. N-not quite enough m-mon —”

“Dear me! How much short are you?”

“S-S-S-Six shill — S-S-S-Six —”

“Six shillings? Well, I’m very sorry. Look here, my good fellow, here’s seven-and-sixpence and God bless you!”

"T-T-thank you very much, sir. W-will you give me your n-name and —"

"No, no, no, that's quite all right. I'm very pleased to be of assistance. Please forget all about it."

He pressed the soldier's hand and hurried on. It was done. He had performed a kind, unselfish action and no one should ever hear of it. Mr. Pothecary's eyes glowed with satisfaction. Poor fellow! even if the story were slightly exaggerated, what did it matter? He was obviously a discharged soldier, ill, and in need. The seven-and-sixpence would make an enormous difference. He would always cherish the memory of his kind, unknown benefactor. It was a glorious sensation! Why had he never thought of doing a kindly act? It was inspiring, illuminating, almost intoxicating! He recalled with zest the delirious feeling which ran through him when he said, "No, no, no!" He would *not* give his name. He was the good Samaritan, a ship passing in the night. And now he would be able to go home, or go back to his business. He swung down the lane, singing to himself. As he turned the corner he came to a low bungalow-building. It was in a rather deserted spot. It had a board outside which announced "Tea, cocoa, light refreshments. Cyclists catered for."

It was past mid-day, and although tea and cocoa had never made any great appeal to the gastronomic fancies of Edwin Pothecary, he felt in his present spiritually elevated mood that here was a suitable spot for a well-merited rest and lunch.

He entered a deserted room, filled with light oak chairs, and tables with green-tiled tops on which were placed tin vases containing dried ferns. A few blue-bottles darted away from the tortuous remains of what had once apparently been a ham, lurking behind tall bottles of sweets on the counter. The room smelt of soda and pickles. Edwin tapped on the table for some time, but no one came. At last a woman entered from the front door leading to the garden. She was fat and out of breath.

Edwin coughed and said:

“Good-mornin’, madam. May I have a bite of some-
thin’?”

The woman looked at him and continued panting. When her pulmonary contortions had somewhat subsided she said:

“I s’pose you ‘aven’t seen a pale young man up the lane?”

It was difficult to know what made him do it, but Edwin lied. He said:

“No.”

“Oh!” she replied. “I don’t know where ‘e’s got to. ‘E’s not s’posed to go out of the garden. ‘E’s been ill, you know.”

“Really!”

“‘E’s my nefyer, but I can’t always keep an eye on ‘im. ‘E’s a bright one, ‘e is. I shall ‘ave ‘im sent back to the ‘ome.”

“Ah, poor fellow! I suppose he was — injured in the war?”

“War!” The plump lady snorted. She became almost aggressive and confidential. She came close up to Edwin and shook her finger backwards and forwards in front of his eyes.

“I’ll tell yer ‘ow much war ‘e done. When they talked about conscription, ‘e got that frightened, ‘e went out every day and tried to drink himself from a A1 man into a C III man, and by God! ‘e succeeded.”

“You don’t say so!”

“I do say so. And more. When ‘is turn came, ‘e was in the ‘ospital with Delirious Trimmings.”

“My God!”

“‘E’s only just come out. ‘E’s all right as long as ‘e don’t get ‘old of a little money.”

“What do you mean?”

“If ‘e can get ‘old of the price of a few whiskies, ‘e’ll ‘ave another attack come on! What are yer goin’ ter ‘ave — tea or cocoa?”

“I must go! I must go!” exclaimed the only customer Mrs. Boggins had had for two days, and gripping his umbrella he dashed out of the shop.

“Good Lord! there’s another one got ‘em!” ejaculated the good landlady. “I wonder whether ‘e pinched anything while I was out? ‘Ere! Come back, you dirty little bow-legged swipe!”

But Mr. Pothecary was racing down the lane, muttering to himself: “Yes, that was a good action! A very good action indeed!”

A mile further on he came to a straggling village, a forlorn unkempt spot, only relieved by a gaudy inn

called "The Two Tumblers." Edwin staggered into the private bar and drank two pints of Government ale and a double gin as the liquid accompaniment to a hunk of bread and cheese.

It was not till he had lighted his pipe after the negotiation of these delicacies that he could again focus his philosophical outlook. Then he thought to himself: "It's a rum thing 'ow difficult it is to do a good action. You'd think it 'd be dead easy, but everythin' seems against yer. One must be able to do it *somewhere*. P'raps one ought to go abroad, among foreigners and black men. That's it! That's why all these 'ere Bible Society people go out among black people, Chinese and so on. They find there's nothin' doin' over 'ere."

Had it not been for the beer and gin it is highly probable that Edwin would have given up the project, and have returned to fish and chips. But lying back in a comfortable seat in "The Two Tumblers" his thoughts mellowed. He felt broad-minded, comfortable, tolerant . . . one had to make allowances. There must be all sorts of ways. Money wasn't the only thing. Besides, he was spending too much. He couldn't afford to go on throwing away seven-and-six-pences. One must be able to help people — by helping them. Doing things for them which didn't cost money. He thought of Sir Walter Raleigh throwing down his cloak for Queen Elizabeth to walk over. Romantic but — extravagant and silly, really a shrewd political move, no doubt; not a good action at all. If he met an ill-clad tramp he could take off his coat and wrap round

his shoulders and then — ? Walk home to Quince Villa in his braces ? What would Mrs. Pothecary have to say ? Phew ! One could save people from drowning, but he didn't know how to swim. Fire ! Perhaps there would be a fire. He could swarm up a ladder and save a woman from the top bedroom window. Heroic, but hardly inconspicuous ; not exactly what he had meant. Besides, the firemen would never let him ; they always kept these showy stunts for themselves. There *must* be something. . . .

He walked out of "The Two Tumblers."

Crossing the road, he took a turning off the High Street. He saw a heavily-built woman carrying a basket of washing. He hurried after her, and raising his hat, said : "Excuse me, madam, may I carry your basket for you ? "

She turned on him suspiciously and glared :

"No, thanks, Mr. Bottle-nose. I've 'ad some of that before. You 'op it ! Mrs. Jaggs 'ad 'ers pinched last week that way."

"Of course," he thought to himself as he hurried away. "The trouble is I'm not dressed for the part. A bloomin' swell can go about doin' good actions all day and not arouse suspicions. If I try and 'elp a girl off a tram-car I get my face slapped."

Mr. Pothecary was learning. He was becoming a complete philosopher, but it was not till late in the afternoon that he suddenly realized that patience and industry are always rewarded. He was appealed to by a maiden in distress.

It came about in this way. He found the atmosphere of Northern London entirely unsympathetic to good deeds. All his action appeared suspect. He began to feel at last like a criminal. He was convinced that he was being watched and followed. Once he patted a little girl's head in a paternal manner. Immediately a woman appeared at a doorway and bawled out:

"'Ere, Lizzie, you come inside!"

At length in disgust he boarded a south-bound 'bus. He decided to experiment nearer home. He went to the terminus and took a train to the station just before his own. It was a small town called Uplingham. This should be the last dance of the moral philanderer. If there was no one in Uplingham upon whom he could perform a good action, he would just walk home—barely two miles—and go to bed and forget all about it. To-morrow he would return to Fish-and-chips, and the normal behavior of the normal citizen.

Uplingham was a dismal little town, consisting mostly of churches, chapels and pubs, and apparently quite deserted. As Edwin wandered through it there crept over him a sneaking feeling of relief. If he met no one—well, there it was, he had done his best; and he could go home with a clear conscience. After all it was the spirit that counted in these things. . . .

"O-o-oh!"

He was passing a small stone church, standing back on a little frequented lane. The maiden was seated alone in the porch and she was crying. Edwin hustled through the gate and as he approached her he had time

to observe that she was young, quietly dressed, and distinctly pretty.

"You are in trouble," he said in his most feeling manner.

She looked up at him quickly, and dabbed her eyes.

"I've lost my baby! I've lost my baby!" she cried.

"Dear, dear, that's very unfortunate! How did it happen?"

She pointed at an empty perambulator in the porch.

"I waited an hour here for my friends and husband and the clergyman. My baby was to be christened." She gasped incoherently. "No one turned up. I went across to the Vicarage. The Vicar was away. I believe I ought to have gone to St. Bride's. This is St. Paul's. They didn't know anything about it. They say people often make that mistake. When I got back the baby was gone. O-o-o-oh!"

"There, there, don't cry," said Mr. Pothecary. "Now I'll go over to St. Bride's and find out about it."

"Oh, sir, do you mind waiting here with the perambulator while I go? I want my baby. I want my baby."

"Why, yes, of course, of course."

She dashed up the lane and left Mr. Pothecary in charge of an empty perambulator. In fifteen minutes' time a thick-set young man came hurrying up to the porch. He looked at Edwin and pointing to the perambulator said:

"Is this Mrs. Frank's or Mrs. Fred's?"

"I don't know," said Edwin, rather testily.

"You don't know! But you're old Binns, ain't you?"

"No, I'm not."

The young man looked at him searchingly and then disappeared. Ten minutes elapsed and then a small boy rode up on a bicycle. He was also out of breath.

"Has Mrs. George been 'ere?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Edwin.

"Mr. Henderson says he's awfully sorry but he won't be able to get away. You are to kiss the baby for 'im."

"I don't know anything about it."

"This is St. Bride's, isn't it?"

"No, this is St. Paul's."

"Oh!" The boy leapt on to the bicycle and also vanished.

"This is absurd," thought Edwin. "Of course, the whole thing is as plain as daylight. The poor girl has come to the wrong church. The whole party is at St. Bride's, somebody must have taken the baby on there. I might as well take the perambulator along. They'll be pleased. Now I wonder which is the way."

He wheeled the perambulator into the lane. There was no one about to ask. He progressed nearly two hundred yards till he came to a field with a pond in it. This was apparently the wrong direction. He was staring about when he suddenly became aware of a hue and cry. A party of people came racing down the lane headed by the thick-set man, who was exclaiming:

"There he is! There he is!"

Edwin felt his heart beating. This was going to be a little embarrassing. They closed on him. The thick-set man seized his wrists and at the same time remarked:

“ See he hasn’t any firearms on him, Frank.”

The large man alluded to as Frank gripped him from behind.

“ What have you done with my baby ? ” he demanded fiercely.

“ I ’aven’t seen no baby,” yelped Mr. Potheccary.

“ Oh ! ’Ayen’t yer ! What are yer doin’ with my perambulator then ? ”

“ I’m takin’ it to St. Bride’s Church.”

“ Goin’ in the opposite direction.”

“ I didn’t know the way.”

“ Where’s the baby ? ”

“ I ’aven’t seen it, I tell yer. The mother said she’d lost it.”

“ What the hell ! Do you know the mother’s in bed sick ? You’re a liar, my man, and we’re goin’ to take you in charge. If you’ve done anything to my baby I’ll kill you with my hands.”

“ That’s it, Frank. Let ’im ’ave it. Throw ’im in the pond ! ”

“ I tell yer I don’t know anythin’ about it all, with yer Franks, Freds and Georges ! Go to the devil, all of yer ! ”

In spite of his protestations, some one produced a rope and they handcuffed him and tied him to the gate of the field. A small crowd had collected and began

to boo and jeer. A man from a cottage hard by produced a drag, and between them they dragged the pond, as the general belief was that Edwin had tied a stone to the baby and thrown it in and was then just about to make off.

The uproar continued for some time, mud and stones being thrown about rather carelessly.

The crowd became impatient that no baby was found in the pond. At length another man turned up on a bicycle and called out:

“What are you doing, Frank? You’ve missed the christening!”

“What!”

“Old Binns turned up with the nipper all right. He’d come round the wrong way.”

The crowd was obviously disappointed at the release of Edwin, and the father’s only solatium was:

“Well, it’s lucky for you, old bird!”

He and his friends trundled the perambulator away rapidly across the fields. Edwin had hardly time to give a sigh of relief before he found himself the center of a fresh disturbance. He was approaching the church when another crowd assailed him, headed by the forlorn maiden. She was still in a state of distress, but she was hugging a baby to her.

“Ah! You’ve found the baby!” exclaimed Edwin, trying to be amiable.

“Where is the perambulator?” she demanded.

“Your ‘usband ’as taken it away, madam. He seemed to think I —”

A tall frigid young man stepped forward and said:

“Excuse me, I am the lady’s husband. Will you please explain yourself?”

Then Edwin lost his temper.

“Well, damn it, I don’t know who you all are!”

“The case is quite clear. You volunteered to take charge of the perambulator while my wife was absent. On her return you announce that it is spirited away. I shall hold you responsible for the entire cost — nearly ten pounds.”

“Make it a thousand,” roared Edwin. “I’m ‘aving a nice cheap day.”

“I don’t wish for any more of your insolence, either. My wife has had a very trying experience. The baby has been christened Fred.”

“Well, what’s the matter with that?”

“Nothing,” screamed the mother. “*Only that it is a girl!* It’s a girl and it has been duly christened Fred in a Christian church. Oh! there’s been an awful muddle.”

“It’s not this old fool’s fault,” interpolated the elderly woman quietly. “You see, Mrs. Frank and Mrs. Fred Smith were both going to have their babies christened to-day. Only Mrs. Frank was took sick, and sent me along with the child. I went to the wrong church and thinkin’ there was some mistake, went back home. Mrs. Frank’s baby’s never been christened at all. In the meantime, the ceremony was ready to start at St. Paul’s and Frank ’issel was there. No baby. They sends old Binns to scout around at other churches.

People do make mistakes — finds this good lady's child all primed up for christening in the church door, and no one near, carries it off. In the meantime, the father had gone on the ramp. It's him that probably went off with the perambulator and trounced you up a bit, old sport. It'll learn you not to interfere so much in future perhaps."

"And the baby's christened Fred!" wailed the mother. "My baby! My Gwendoline!" And she looked at Edwin with bitter recrimination in her eyes.

There was still a small crowd following and boys were jeering, and a fox-terrier, getting very excited, jumped up and bit Mr. Pothecary through the seat of his trousers. He struck at it with his stick, and hit a small boy, whose mother happened to be present. The good lady immediately entered the lists.

"Baby-killer. . . . Hun!" were the last words he heard as he was chased up the street and across the fields in the direction of his own village.

When he arrived it was nearly dark. Mr. Pothecary was tired, dirty, battered, torn, outraged, bruised and hatless. And his spirit hardened. The forces of reaction surged through him. He was done with good actions. He felt vindictive, spiteful, wicked. Slowly he took the last turning and his eye once more alighted on — the Peels's fowl house.

And there came to him a vague desire to end his day by performing some action the contrary to good, something spiteful, petty, malign. His soul demanded some recompense for its abortive energies. And then he re-

membered that the Peels were away. They were returning late that evening. The two intensive fowl-houses were at the end of the kitchen garden, where all the young spring cabbages and peas had just been planted. They could be approached between a slit in the narrow black fence adjacent to a turnip field. Rather a long way round. A simple and rather futile plan sprang into his mind, but he was too tired to think of anything more criminal or diabolic.

He would creep round to the back, get through the fence, force his way into the fowl-house. Then he would kick out all those expensive Rhode Island pampered hens and lock them out. Inside he would upset everything and smash the place to pieces. The fowls would get all over the place. They would eat the young vegetables. Some of them would get lost, stolen by gypsies, killed by rats. What did he care? The Peels would probably not discover the outrage till the morrow, and they would never know who did it. Edwin chuckled inwardly, and rolled his eyes like the smooth villain of a fit-up melodrama. He glanced up and down to see that no one was looking, then he got across a gate and entered the turnip field.

Within five minutes he was forcing the door of the fowl-house with a spade. The fowls were already settling down for the night, and they clucked rather alarmingly, but Edwin's blood was up. He chased them all out, forty-five of them, and made savage lunges at them with his feet. Then he upset all the corn he could find, and poured water on it and jumped on it. He

smashed the complicated invention suspended from the ceiling, whereby the fowls had to reach up and get one grain of corn at a time. To his joy he found a pot of green paint, which he flung promiscuously over the walls and floor (and incidentally his clothes).

Then he crept out and bolted both of the doors.

The sleepy creatures were standing about outside, some feebly pecking about on the ground. He chased them through into the vegetable garden; then he rubbed some of the dirt and paint from his clothes and returned to the road.

When he arrived home he said to his wife:

“I fell off a tram on Waterloo Bridge. Lost my hat.”

He was cold and wet and his teeth were chattering. His wife hustled him off to bed and gave him a little hot grog.

Between the sheets he recovered contentment. He gurgled exultantly at this last and only satisfying exploit of the day. He dreamed lazily of the blind rage of the Peels. . . .

It must have been half-past ten when his wife came up to bring him some hot gruel. He had been asleep. She put the cup by the bedside and rearranged his pillow.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m right,” he murmured.

She sat on a chair by the side of the bed and after a few minutes remarked:

" You've missed an excitement while you've been asleep."

" Oh ? "

" Yes. A fire ! "

" A fire ? "

" The Peels came home about an hour and a half ago and found the place on fire at the back."

" Oh ? "

" Their cook Lizzie has been over. She said some straw near the wash-house must have started it. It's burnt out the wash-house and both the fowl-houses. She says Mr. Peel says he don't care very much because he was heavily insured for the lot. But the funny thing is, the fowls wasn't insured and they've found the whole lot down the field on the rabbit-hutches. Somebody must have got in and let the whole lot out. It was a fine thing to do, or else the poor things would have been burnt up. What's the matter, Ned ? Is the gruel too hot ? "